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WHAT ARE THEY SAYING ABOUT THE JONAH PSALM?
AN ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT TRENDS IN ITS INTERPRETATION

by

Daniel A. Neal

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This thesis is dedicated to the eternal memory and blessed repose of two great lovers of God, Rebecca Twersky and Gerald McOsker.

◆ The Jonah Psalm ◆ Jonah 2:1-11 (NAB) ◆

2:1 But the Lord sent a large fish, that swallowed Jonah; and he remained in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2 From the belly of the fish Jonah said this prayer to the Lord, his God:

3 *Out of my distress I called to the Lord,
and he answered me;*

*From the midst of the nether world I cried for help,
and you heard my voice.*

4 *For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea,
and the flood enveloped me;*

*All your breakers and your billows
passed over me.*

5 *Then I said, "I am banished from your sight!
yet would I again look upon your holy temple."*

6 *The waters swirled about me,
threatening my life;
the abyss enveloped me;
seaweed clung about my head.*

7 *Down I went to the roots of the mountains;
the bars of the nether world were closing behind me forever,
But you brought my life up from the pit,
O Lord, my God.*

8 *When my soul fainted within me,
I remembered the Lord;
My prayer reached you
in your holy temple.*

9 *Those who worship vain idols
forsake their source of mercy.*

10 *But I, with resounding praise,
will sacrifice to you;*

*What I have vowed I will pay:
deliverance is from the Lord.*

11 Then the Lord commanded the fish to spew Jonah upon the shore.

Chapter 1: The Problem with the Jonah Psalm

Most people are, at the very least, familiar with the imagery of a man being swallowed whole by a great fish. We know this imagery from a biblical story that has become lore in the collective consciousness of Western civilization. This imagery comes to us from the tale of Jonah, and it is one of the better-known stories from the Hebrew Bible. Like the stories of the Garden of Eden, the Flood of Noah, the Exodus out of Egypt, and King David, it captivates the attention of the reader in a special way. It makes use of themes that are near to the heart of every person – reluctance to take on a difficult task, forgiveness, and a fantastic journey. It is this fantastic journey that people remember about the book of Jonah, and a particularly extraordinary event that occurs during it.

The story begins with a prophet who is so reluctant to prophesy doom against the enemy city of Nineveh that he flees in the opposite direction of the task God commanded him. He pays pagan sailors for safe passage to a faraway place called Tarshish. But, when they set sail, a violent tempest breaks out that threatens to drown them all. Everyone onboard knows that this squall is of divine origin, so they all cast lots to see whose god is responsible. Meanwhile, Jonah actually needs to be roused out of sleep from below deck to participate. When they realize that Jonah's God is the cause of the storm, they confront him. He gives an orthodox profession of his Jewish faith, and suggests that the sailors cast him overboard, so that God may spare their lives and that he may die. They attempt to pursue other options first, including running the ship ashore, which one commentator states would have been foolish, and potentially deadly.¹ When they exhaust these options,

¹ Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah* (AB 24B; New York: Doubleday, 1990) 141-42.

they pray that Jonah's God would not condemn them for respecting his request. After they throw Jonah overboard, the sea grows calm once more.

One would assume that this would be the end of Jonah, but an extraordinary event now comes into play. While in the water, Jonah is swallowed whole by a 'great fish', and, rather than drown, he survives in the innards of this creature. This tale has been parodied, lampooned and reused an untold number of times, each having its own version of the 'great fish' to entertain the audience.² To get out of the predicament of residing in this make-shift life-extender, Jonah prays a psalm in the belly of the fish. It is a classic example of a psalm of thanks, but for what is he giving thanks? Is he thanking God for having him thrown overboard? It doesn't seem to be the case. Is he thanking God for having been swallowed by the great fish? Not directly, no. It appears that Jonah is saying thank you for his salvation before he's saved from the 'great fish'!

Some have proposed that this is an acceptable turn of events. Jonah is replying in gratitude for having been saved by the 'great fish' from a death by drowning. Jonah, however, doesn't at any point apologize for, or acknowledge, his disobedience. The psalm simply moves from an expression of personal needs to thanks for divine deliverance. Therefore, one would think he would fulfill the vows (2:10) he made in the thanksgiving and become God's good prophet. God commands the fish to regurgitate him back onto dry land, and then commands Jonah to go to Nineveh a second time. Jonah does so, but soon thereafter he becomes the same old cantankerous Jonah. The only thing

² Two specific examples: Gerhard Sauter, "Jonah 2: A Prayer Out of the Deep," in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller* (eds. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003) 146. He refers to a collection of fantastic stories, presumably told by an 18th century German Baron von Munchausen, in one of which the fish narrative about Jonah is given a humorous parody. Another example on the opposite end of the spectrum is *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie*, released in 2002. The *VeggieTales* is a computer animated children's show featuring anthropomorphic vegetables teaching Judeo-Christian values.

that changed is Jonah's former reluctance in carrying out God's command. He arrives at Nineveh, and proclaims doom to the people: "In forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed" (3:4b). In a miraculous turn of events, the pagan Ninevites actually repent and renounce their wicked behavior immediately. But, instead of pleasing Jonah, this only outrages him! He is 'righteously indignant' that God did not destroy the city, and allowed them to repent instead. Jonah does not want them to be a part of the Covenant; rather he wants God's justice, as apposed to God's mercy. The book ends with God having the last word, stating in Jonah 4:11: "(S)hould I not be concerned over the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot know their right hand from their left, not to mention all the animals?" Jonah is rendered silent.

One commentator notes: "Though the book of Jonah is only 48 verses in length, it continues to spark the imagination of full-fledged monograph and commentary writers."³ This quote captures the nature of the debate that surrounds not only the book of Jonah, but also Jonah's prayer. So, there has been a spirited debate between scholars regarding the originality of the Jonah psalm, which is regarded by all to be the apex of action in the book of Jonah. The book of Jonah begins with the prophet showing such reluctance to carry out God's will that he embarked on a ship heading in the opposite direction from his given task. When the Lord commands a great fish to swallow him in the sea, Jonah has a change of heart, and thanks the Lord for his deliverance. But after he is released upon the dry land, it is as though nothing happened; he is still truculent and reluctant. This begs the question: does the psalm really fit into this context?

Many a scholar has attempted to discern the psalm's origins, genre, and purpose. Definitive answers, however, still tend to elude the grasp of scholarship. This thesis will

³ Kenneth M. Craig, Jr., "Jonah in Recent Research," *Currents in Research* 7 (1999) 97-118.

review the current state of the scholarship with regard to the Jonah psalm (Jonah 2:3-10) on its date of composition, specific rhetorical devices used, as well its genre and how it relates to the book of Jonah as a whole. To begin, however, it would be best to give an overview of the scholarly debate.

Some view the psalm as a disruptive insertion into the prose narrative, and this theory will be called “the insertion theory.” The first, most apparent reason why many scholars have held this opinion is the seemingly inappropriate nature of Jonah’s prayer of thanksgiving before his deliverance from the great fish’s belly, and particularly since the rest of the narrative still portrays Jonah as an angry curmudgeon. One prominent proponent of the insertion theory is Phyllis Tribble. Perhaps *the* authority on using rhetorical analysis to examine the book of Jonah, she first posited an ‘insertion theory’ in her Ph.D. dissertation in 1963.⁴ She would go on to write subsequent works supporting this theory.⁵ John Miles, whose ultimate hypothesis is that the psalm is inserted to enhance the comedic value involved, will reinforce Tribble’s scholarship with his own in 1975.⁶ John Day, an Oxford scholar, concurs with his contribution in 1990, seeing the book of Jonah as a call for the inclusion of pagans into the covenant.⁷

On the other hand, there are those who strongly disagree that this psalm is inserted. They call the psalm ‘original’ and ‘crucial’ to the text. This is the minority view amongst scholars, and their hypothesis is easily called “the unity theory.” Among this

⁴ Phyllis Tribble, *Studies in the Book of Jonah* (Ph.D. diss.; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1963).

⁵ Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), as well as “Jonah,” in *The Twelve Prophets* (NIB 7; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

⁶ John A. Miles, Jr., “Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody,” *JQR* 65 (1975) 168-81.

⁷ John Day, “Problems in the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah,” from *In Quest of the Past: Studies on Israelite Religion, Literature and Prophetism: Papers Read at the Joint British-Dutch Old Testament Conference* (Elspeet, 1988; OTS; ed. A. S. van der Woude; Leiden: Brill, 1990) 32-47.

theory's champions are George Landes (1967),⁸ who may very well have been writing in response to Tribble, and Jonathan Magonet, who called the insertion theory into question in 1976.⁹ Duane L. Christensen, writing in 1985, is perhaps one of the most innovative defenders of the Jonah psalm's authenticity, arguing that there is great coherence in the entire book of Jonah.¹⁰ Another prominent scholar who defends the psalm's authenticity is Jack Sasson.¹¹ He acknowledges that neither theory is ever likely to be proven, but he is not convinced that such great lengths made by scholars to insert the psalm into the narrative are warranted historically. So, until proven otherwise, Sasson will assume its original form as within the text. Lastly, Alastair Hunter, writing rather recently in 2001, concludes on a rhetorical basis that the psalm is necessary to the text.¹² The entire book comes together to form one ancient Exodus-motif laden work.

There are also scholars who choose no discernable side in the debate. Athalya Brenner, writing in 1993, examines the purpose of the psalm, but chooses no side in the debate, stating both sides have merit.¹³ James Watts (1995) isn't particularly concerned with the psalm's integrity, as much as he is in using it to prove his theory on song being

⁸ George M. Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah: The Contextual Interpretation of the Jonah Psalm," *Int* 21 (1967) 3-31.

⁹ Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Frankfurt: Lang & Co., 1976).

¹⁰ Duane L. Christensen, "The Song of Jonah: A Metrical Analysis," *JBL* 104 (1985) 217-31.

¹¹ Sasson, *Jonah*, 16-20, 160-66, 202-13.

¹² Alastair Hunter, "Jonah From the Whale: Exodus Motifs in Jonah 2," in *The Elusive Prophet: The Prophet as a Historical Person, Literary Character & Anonymous Artist* (ed. Johannes C. de Moor; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 142-58.

¹³ Athalya Brenner, "Jonah's Poem Out of and Within Its Context," in *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings* (JSOTSup 144; ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 183-92.

placed in ancient narratives as a plot device.¹⁴ Finally, David Marcus, writing in the same year as Watts, dwells exclusively on the satiric implications of the book of Jonah.¹⁵

As can be seen from the main core of scholars referenced in this thesis, there are a multitude of opinions about the authenticity of the psalm. It should be noted that there has been a noticeable trend in recent years towards a “unity theory,” that the psalm is considered original to the work, but the overall scholarship is in flux. In sum, there is a plethora of opinions as to how the psalm came to be part of the book of Jonah, whether the scholars argue for the “unity theory” or the “insertion theory.” The most prominent of these contributions will be examined in this thesis.

Both the “unity theory” and the “insertion theory” have supporters and detractors. Most who have come down definitively on one side or the other have attempted to place the psalm in some historical context that would allow it to be easily dated. The question is whether the psalm gives evidence that it was composed separately from the prose (e.g. clear anachronisms such as ‘aramaisms’, which will be discussed shortly). Many scholars, before the dawn of the historical-critical method,¹⁶ placed the composition of the psalm, and the rest of the book, during the lifetime of the historical Jonah, son of Amittai, mentioned in 2 Kings 14:23-25. This dated both psalm and book to the time of the 8th century. Whether or not this theory holds true today will also be examined.

Another way of examining the psalm is by its rhetorical features. The language of the psalm has certain peculiarities. Some of the language of the psalm doesn’t seem to fit

¹⁴ James W. Watts, “Song and the Ancient Reader,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 22 (1995) 135-47.

¹⁵ David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (BJS 301; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002). The Historical-Critical Method is a technique used in Biblical studies to accurately ascertain the motives, meanings and *sitz im leben* of all the books in the Bible. While it respects the spiritual authenticity of the books guided by the Holy Spirit, it attempts to understand their human authors and dates of composition.

with the prose narrative. If the psalm was an insertion of some kind, the ‘inserter’ didn’t go to great lengths to hide the fact. However, it can just as easily be argued that the peculiarities can be explained as part of the narrative intent. What may be the most interesting aspect of the rhetorical arguments is the variety of conclusions several scholars have proposed while examining the same evidence.

Finally, the last, and perhaps most ambitious test regarding the authenticity of the Jonah psalm is genre. A particular genre almost certainly presumes a set purpose by the author, and I will examine whether the purpose of the book of Jonah supports the insertion or unity theory. Again, as with the language of the Jonah psalm, there are a variety of answers proposed by scholars. As one might assume, simply because one issue (e.g. dating the psalm) may work for one theory does not mean another issue (e.g. genre and purpose of the psalm) will work for the same theory. In addition, different scholars come to different conclusions based on the same evidence in the psalm itself, and this is to be expected.

The numbering of verses in the psalm is problematic, since there are two distinct sets of verse numbers for the psalm, one set deriving from the MT, the other from the LXX. For the sake of continuity, as well as for the ease of reading, this thesis will incorporate only one of the verse numberings, the LXX found in the New American Bible (NAB). Those quotations placed in this thesis that use the other form of numbering, particularly Tribble and Landes, will be edited, and the NAB numbering will be substituted. A footnote will be placed to acknowledge this change. Nevertheless, while different scholars use different translations of the psalm, these differences do not affect the research presented. One scholar describes research on the Jonah psalm this way:

Rather early in the comparatively long history of modern literary criticism of the book of Jonah, scholars detected certain incongruities between the psalm that comprises most of Chapter 2 (vss. 3-10) and the surrounding prose narrative.¹⁷

This thesis will discuss certain incongruities of the Jonah psalm. The psalm does not appear to fit into the overall framework of the book at first glance. The question is: ‘Why do these incongruities exist at all?’ If the psalm is indeed inserted, then why did the one who inserted it not do a better job of making it fit? Making insertions fit into narratives would be in the skill-set of any good editor. The opposite theory, however, has its own pitfalls. If indeed the psalm and the prose are one original, unified work, then why do they not seem to fit together? Both theories will be addressed in this thesis, as well as their strengths and their weaknesses. The basic litmus tests that recent Biblical scholars employ for Scripture, in order to uncover its meaning and purpose, have been used on the Jonah psalm as well: attempting to date the psalm to a specific period of time, examining the rhetoric and linguistic features of the psalm, and determining the genre and purpose of the psalm. This thesis will use the data of the scholars to attempt to uncover whether either theory has merit, and if they both do, which one has more.

Finally, the scholars whose works are examined in this thesis do not exhaust the list of scholarly commentaries on the Jonah psalm. They do, however, represent the basic views on the issue, and their views best survey the gamut of viewpoints. The paper henceforth will be divided into four parts: dating the psalm, its rhetorical features, its purpose, and a conclusion.

¹⁷ Landes, “The Kerygma,” 3.

Chapter Two: Dating the Psalm

The task of dating the psalm involves examining the peculiarities and uniqueness of the language involved in the book. Unlike most prophetic literature, the book of Jonah cannot be located in a concrete timeline. It has no superscription that places it in the reign of any particular monarch, or other evidence to mark it clearly as pre-exilic,¹⁸ exilic,¹⁹ or post-exilic literature.²⁰ It also contains no reference to definite historical events.

A. The Problem of Dating

For centuries, the protagonist of this book was traditionally considered to be the same Jonah mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, the son of Amittai from Gath-hepher. The earliest extant form of the book of Jonah is the Septuagint translation from the latter part of the third century BC. In this particular edition, the psalm is substantially the same as is found in the Masoretic text.²¹ For a date of the original composition of the book as a whole, Phyllis Tribble succinctly states:

Two dates set the boundaries. The reference in 2 Kgs 14:23-25 to Jonah son of Amittai in the reign of Jeroboam II posits the eighth century BCE as the *terminus a quo*. The reference in the Wisdom of ben Sira 49:10 to the “book of the twelve” prophets posits the second century BCE as the *terminus ad quem*. Within these boundaries, every century has been proposed. Although the majority of opinions clusters around the sixth, fifth and fourth centuries, it but shows how indeterminate is the date. The book may belong to the pre-exilic, exilic, or post-exilic period. Dating it becomes even more elusive if a history of composition lies behind the present form.²²

Nineveh existed previous to the rise of the Assyrian empire, and was made the capital city of the empire by Sennacherib in the 7th century BC. It remained the capital

¹⁸ E.g. Hos. 1:1 and Amos 1:1.

¹⁹ E.g. Ezek. 1:1-3.

²⁰ E.g. Hag. 1:1 and Zech. 1:1

²¹ Landes, “The Kerygma,” 9.

²² Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 466.

until the fall of Assyria in 612 BC to the Babylonians. So hated was the Assyrian empire by the Israelites that the book of Nahum was written in exaltation of its downfall, the phrase “Nineveh was” is in the perfect tense in Hebrew (in Jonah 3:3).²³ It may indicate that Nineveh was a place that no longer existed at the time of the writing, but the perfect tense is a common stylistic phenomenon in Hebrew literature, and shouldn’t be trusted as proof.²⁴

John Day notes what he believes to be most remarkable about the story, aside from the drama inside the famed ‘great fish.’ This is the “instantaneous mass repentance of the Ninevites in response to the brief sermon by a foreign prophet – the shortest sermon in world history – an extraordinary event that has left no trace in the Assyrian records.”²⁵ He also examines the strange phrase ‘the king of Nineveh,’ which he likens to someone speaking of ‘the king of London’, not ‘the king of England’. Also of note is that, at the time when Jonah the historical figure was supposed to have lived, the capital of Assyria was Nimrud, not Nineveh.²⁶ But Tribble would caution against any supposition about the King of Nineveh, asserting that elsewhere in the Bible, “Similar phrases identifying historical kings with their royal residences occur in the Bible (e.g. 1 Kings 21:1; 2 Kings 1:3).”²⁷

In attempting to date the psalm to a time period more specific than simply between the eighth and second century BC, Day is alone. He posits a date sometime in the fourth century, or as he refers to it, the “Persian period.” He refers to Jonah’s apparent dependence on various exilic and post-exilic Biblical sources to support the suggested

²³ A. Kirk Grayson, “Nineveh” (*ABD* 4; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1118-19.

²⁴ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 465.

²⁵ Day, “Problems,” 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 465.

dating.²⁸ In connection with Hunter's dating of the book, he asserts that Joppa, Jonah's "point of embarkation ... has been the location of the Perseus-Andromeda legend from at least the 4th century BC."²⁹ Hunter is positing that the town of Joppa had only been called Joppa since that time, which would be a far more concrete *terminus a quo*. In addition, there is no evidence found in antiquity of the city of Nineveh, or the collective Assyrian empire, converting to a belief in the Israelite God, nor repenting from an evil by way of an Israelite prophet.

There have also been attempts to date the book of Jonah by the type of theology it espouses. This model has also met with frustration because nothing anchors the book to any concrete time period.³⁰ The same boundaries remain: the eighth century BC as a *terminus a quo*, because of the 2 Kings 14:23-25 reference, and the second century BC as a *terminus ad quem* because of its reference in the 2nd century BC Wisdom of ben Sira 49:10.

²⁸ Day, *Problems*, 34: "...the Deuteronomic history (cf. I Kings xix 4-5 and Jonah iv 6. 8; II Kings xiv 25 and Jonah i 1), Jeremiah (cf. Jer. xviii 8 and Jonah iii 10), and Ezekiel (cf. Ezek. xxvi 16 and Jonah iii 6, Ezek. xxvii 25-9 and Jonah I 3-6), as well as the post-exilic prophecy of Joel (cf. Joel ii 13-14 and Jonah iii 9, iv 2). The last, in fact, probably brings the date of Jonah down to the 4th century BC." As scholarly historical backup, he also references Ctesias of Cnidus (a 5th century physician quoted by the historian Diodorus Siculus), who, like the book of Jonah, referred to Nineveh as an exceedingly great city. Also of note, he states that "Another classical source, Herodotus ix 24, is commonly cited to support the origin in the Persian period of the custom of the animals engaging in mourning, of which we read in Jonah iii 7f ... It also tends to be overlooked that the practice referred to by Herodotus is also attested among the Greeks (cf. Plutarch, *Alexander* lxxii)."

²⁹ Hunter, *Jonah From the Whale*, 151. The Hellenist tradition links the name "Joppa" with the mother of Andromeda, Perseus' wife.

³⁰ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 466. Day will also take a stab at dating the book through this method, with potentially convincing results.

B. Aramaisms and Dating

A stylistic phenomenon that may shed some light on a potential framework for dating is the existence of ‘aramaisms’. An aramaism is the influence of the Aramaic language on the book’s Hebrew. To quote Jack Sasson:

During the nineteenth century, when scholarship sought to calibrate and date securely the incursion of Aramaic into Hebrew, it was common to locate in the prose of Jonah numerous Aramaic words as well as verbal forms and idioms morphologically and syntactically affected by Aramaic (‘aramaisms’).³¹

This may prove to be an important tool in helping to determine which came first: the psalm or the prose. Since aramaisms are commonplace in later works in the Hebrew Scriptures, one might assume that, if any part of a text contains these markers, they belong to the 4th Century BC or later.

Landes also mentions the Dead Sea Scroll of the Minor Prophets, dated to the second century AD, which offers the earliest Hebrew manuscript of Jonah. It confirms that the psalm is in its correct place in the text, and we therefore possess no concrete evidence that the book of Jonah ever circulated without the psalm.³² Because the Jonah psalm has been noted to be completely free of aramaisms, it was thought possible to date the psalm as earlier than the prose, since the prose is checkered with the supposedly later aramaisms.

John Miles sees aramaisms as a conclusive tool in helping to support the ‘insertion’ theory of the Jonah psalm. He agrees with the source criticism which maintains that the Jonah psalm was composed separately and inserted into the Jonah narrative by an editor, as indicated by the lack of aramaisms. The fact that it is a psalm of

³¹ Sasson, *Jonah*, 204.

³² Landes, “The Kerygma,” 10.

thanksgiving for a rescue from drowning also indicates this, as it is inappropriate before his rescue from the great fish.³³ It also suggests that the psalm is earlier than the surrounding prose, since the prose seems to have aramaisms within it. Day also views these aramaisms as a plausible tool of examination. He, like many others, believes that the Aramaic language indicates a later date, since it was becoming more and more the language of everyday speech for the Levant in the post-exilic period.³⁴

Althaya Brenner also notes the psalm is free from aramaisms, but asks whether that means that the psalm is archaic, or archaistic.³⁵ In other words, does the psalm actually harken back to an earlier time, or was it written by a conscientious writer who wanted to make the psalm seem older than it was. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the modern reader will ever know the answer to this question, since that would require either eyewitness testimony or a first-hand account.

The argument for aramaisms, however, is currently out of vogue, and in many scholars' minds, inconclusive. Tribble mentions it in her treatment of dating the psalm, stating that it falters in the light of philological studies, showing that most of the words used "are characteristic of northern Israelite-Phoenician usage and further that Aramaic and Phoenician linguistic phenomena were present in Hebrew before, as well as after, the exile."³⁶

Sasson also examines the history of the languages of Hebrew and Aramaic. These languages potentially influenced each other's vocabulary from as early as the Solomonic kingdom, which would be far earlier than even the earliest date given to the composition

³³ Miles, *Laughing*, 173.

³⁴ Day, *Problems*, 34-35. It is unclear as to whether or not Day explicitly supports the insertion theory. We can only infer what he may believe by what he has written.

³⁵ Brenner, "Jonah's Poem," 188.

³⁶ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 465.

of any part of Jonah.³⁷ What Sasson is saying is that, even if we deem the psalm to be ‘aramaism-free,’ we can never be truly sure if it really is or not, as it is complicated to filter aramaisms from pristine Hebrew constructions.³⁸

Sasson also considers two logical hypotheses that would refute the aforementioned claim. The first is that “any biblical text remained potentially revisable right through the Second Temple period, when Aramaic was more influential in Israel’s daily life.”³⁹ The second is that “antiquarians of that late period were always capable of emulating archaic, relatively Aramaic-free, diction.”⁴⁰ Sasson concludes, as most current scholars do, that aramaisms cannot be used as a source of dating. Tribble, as noted above, agrees, adding that most turn from this quest out of fear of failure. She, like Sasson, finds all the arguments for a specific date inconclusive, and that “perhaps the best interpretive efforts allow Jonah to move among centuries.”⁴¹

Clearly all attempts to date the book of Jonah specifically are approximate at best, and any attempts to date the psalm separately from the book seem impossible. Tribble’s conjecture to let Jonah move among centuries is a clear concession to the unfeasibility of the task, at least as far as current evidence allows.⁴² Otherwise, there is no concrete evidence as to whether the psalm or the prose came first, if they were not drafted together in the first place. All attempts at dating the psalm to any period more specific than between the 8th and 2nd centuries BC are inconclusive.

³⁷ Sasson, *Jonah*, 204.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Sasson, *Jonah*, 204.

⁴⁰ Ibid. And he adds, “In fact, Hebrew poetry reasonably free of aramaisms was being composed in Hellenistic Judea, comparable in this respect to the better examples drawn from the psalter!”

⁴¹ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 466. She also mentions that Von Rad cautioned against letting conjecture surrounding the matter cloud its interpretation.

⁴² The only scholar encountered in this review who even attempts to give a more specific date than between the 8th and 2nd centuries BC is Day, as already noted. His conjecture regarding the book (and therefore, the psalm’s) dating will be further explored in the conclusion of this thesis.

Chapter Three: Rhetorical Features

Some clues as to the origin of the psalm in Jonah 2 will be sought through its rhetorical and linguistic style. These characteristics might help to determine whether the psalm and the prose narrative were originally independent of one another or not. The psalm's outline is simple: "In itself it represents an individual psalm of thanksgiving in which an opening résumé (v 3) is followed by a detailed account of salvation (vv 4-8) leading in turn to an affirmation and exaltation of God (vv 9-10)."⁴³ It represents a psalm type which would have been commonplace for the pious Jew. Among the scholars who have studied the rhetoric and language in Jonah 2, perhaps the best scholars to consult are Phyllis Tribble, who believes the psalm to be an insertion into the prose narrative, and Duane L. Christensen, who believes the psalm to be the product of the same author as the prose of the book of Jonah. Other scholars, particularly Sasson and Landes, will be consulted in these cases, but Tribble and Christensen will present the most concise arguments.

A. Phyllis Tribble

1. Relationship of the Psalm to the Prose

Tribble keenly notes that Jonah 2 "threatens to drown readers in problems, most especially the relationship of the psalm (2:3-10) to the narrated context (2:1-2, 11)."⁴⁴ She acknowledges symmetry in the whole book of Jonah, a symmetry that she believes is

⁴³ Hunter, *Jonah*, 152.

⁴⁴ Tribble, *Jonah*, 504. The enumeration of the verses of this psalm is changed for the sake of consistency, as noted in the introduction, pg. 7. Tribble uses the New International Version of the Holy Bible in her work.

disrupted by the presence of this psalm.⁴⁵ Tribble offers her analysis of what she deems an impressive chiasm that surrounds the psalm. The chiasm is as follows⁴⁶:

A – And appointed Yahweh a great fish to swallow Jonah, (2:1a)
B – and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (2:1b)
B' – And prayed Jonah to Yahweh his God from the belly of the fish. (2:2)

[Psalm]

A' – And spoke Yahweh to the fish and it vomited Jonah to the dry land. (2:10)

Using this chiasm, Tribble believes that the psalm is an intrusion within the prose which obscures the “literary and theological eloquence of the chiasm.”⁴⁷ She mentions that the outer verses A and A' are meant to house the two inner verses B and B', and she further notes the negative sense of the images of ‘swallow’ and ‘vomit’ to back her claim. The Hebrew verb used to describe Jonah’s consumption is *bl'*. This is found elsewhere in the Bible, but only with a negative meaning (Ex 15:12; Num 16:30, 32, 34). It means ‘devour’ in the most literal sense.⁴⁸ This act of devouring saved Jonah’s life, irony at its finest, as Tribble notes: “The salvation opposes the death he seeks.”⁴⁹ While Jonah thinks his wish to die is granted, God opposes it and he is actually saved, ironically showing that the fish can’t stand Jonah. This, to Tribble, flies in the face of the meaning of the Jonah psalm.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 464-65.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 504. The numbering of the verses in this psalm were changed for the sake of consistency, as noted in the introduction, pg. 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 505.

⁴⁸ Sasson, *Jonah*, 206.

⁴⁹ Tribble, *Jonah*, 504.

The word “vomit” is also thought to evoke negative connotations;⁵⁰ the word in Hebrew is *qy*’. While there is a more delicate word for ejection (e.g. *plṭ Hiph.*), the narrator chooses a more distasteful image (cf. the use of *qy*’ as in Prov 23:8; 25:16). “The fish does not stomach Jonah. For certain, the entire alimentary process, from outside to inside to outside, contains polarities without digesting them.”⁵¹

The phrase “three days and three nights” in the prose of Jonah 2:1 is a dubious one in this instance, and has caused some debate as to what it means exactly. Tribble notes George M. Landes’ mythological interpretation, stating that it is the amount of time needed for the fish to return Jonah from the netherworld as described in the psalm (2:3, 6-7). But this assumes that either Jonah has died, or that he, while still living, entered into the netherworld, neither of which is supported by the prose.⁵² The mention of the netherworld (Sheol) occurs only in the psalm as well, further supporting Tribble’s case for the separation of prose and psalm. Tribble also accepts George M. Landes’ mythological interpretation, but reverses its meaning.⁵³ Instead of the fish rising up with Jonah out of the underworld, the opposite may be happening – that the fish is bringing Jonah down to the underworld during the three day and night span. There is of course the straightforward possibility that the three days and three nights are simply the time it took the fish to bring Jonah to the shore.⁵⁴ Thus, with regard to the “three days and three nights”, this phrase can be explained by the psalm or be interpreted independently of the

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. She references the work of J.S. Ackerman, "Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith (Frank Moore Cross Festschrift)*; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbraun, 1981) 213-46.

⁵⁴ James Limburg, *Jonah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 62.

psalm. Considering its elusive ambiguities, this one simple phrase has stirred up multiple possible meanings in this context.⁵⁵

Considering that Tribble views the prose and psalm as completely separate, it is appropriate to bring up an issue that involves the prose alone. The first time that the “great fish” is mentioned in Jonah, it is male (2:1). The second time, it is female (2:2). There are two phrases about being in “the belly of the fish” (2:1, 2), and they pose different images tied to different grammatical genders in a type of parallelism. According to Tribble, “The masculine plural noun translated ‘belly’ (*m’h*) signifies internal parts. Three places in the Bible it parallels the grammatical feminine noun *btm* to acquire the meaning ‘womb’ (Gen 25:23; Isa 49:1; Ps 71:6; cf. Ruth 1:1).”⁵⁶ This meaning does not occur in the first mention of the fish in Jonah 2:1, where the masculine gender variant of the word “fish” (*dāg*) is used.

In Jonah 2:2, however, the word for “fish” (*dgh*) is feminine gender. The reason for the switch is unknown, but again, Tribble notes that “the imagery of ‘the innards of the ship’ (1:5b), and the phrase ‘from the belly of the fish’ in 2:2 evokes a womb.”⁵⁷ This time, instead of willfully choosing to reside inside a shelter, he has been forced to reside within the innards of a fish, a ‘womb’ which threatens his very life. So, Tribble notes that the entire ‘belly of the fish’ imagery is not dependent on the psalm. The belly of the fish imagery stands alone, as does the Sheol imagery of the psalm.

⁵⁵ Doubtless no one familiar with the Scriptures will fail to see the link between the Old and New Testaments here. Matthew 12:40 directly references the “three days and three nights” in Jonah 2:1 when allegorizing Christ’s three days and nights “in the heart of the earth,” while Mark 8:31 alludes to Jonah indirectly when referencing the suffering and resurrection of the Son of Man. Luke 11:29-30 references the “sign of Jonah” when a crowd asks Jesus for a sign, which is taken as the aforementioned three days and three nights.

⁵⁶ Tribble, *Jonah*, 480. The numeration of the verses has been changed to the NAB usage.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Jack Sasson refers to this, believing that the gender ambiguity is meant for the reader's sensibilities to decide; he also mentions the verbal calisthenics some exegetes have gone to make this ambiguity of the "great fish" work harmoniously. Some remove the second mention of it altogether, while others believe it is a ploy to bring the reader to a deeper understanding regarding the difference between the ship and the fish. An even stranger exegesis has a mid-travel transfer of Jonah from a male fish's belly to a female fish's womb, which is full of baby fish.⁵⁸ Day also mentions some of the more eccentric views regarding the "great fish" held by exegetes: "that it is the name of a ship 'the great fish' or of a public house called 'at the sign of the whale', or yet again as a bathing establishment, or even that the whole incident was merely a dream while Jonah was asleep on the boat!"⁵⁹ Sasson offers a plausible explanation of feminine *dgh* being a rare Hebrew use of the word which can also mean in the 'masculine plural', a group of fish.⁶⁰

Brenner examines this debate, and makes this conclusion:

"Whereas the superscription of the poem has Jonah pray inside the belly of the female fish (2.2), and the conclusion states that God made the (male!) fish spout him out after the prayer had been uttered and heard (2.11), the language of the poem enclosed by these two statements expresses the joy of the praying subject at a salvation effected in the past/present rather than the future. In other words, there is no correlation between the situation of the fictional Jonah and the language of the praying 'I' which is put into his mouth in the psalm; and the seams connecting prose and poetry (2.2, 10) exacerbate the incongruity."⁶¹

While this does not solve the ambiguity of images and genders in the prose, it acknowledges the distinction between the psalm and the prose narrative around it.

⁵⁸ Sasson, *Jonah*, 155-57.

⁵⁹ Day, *Problems*, 32.

⁶⁰ Sasson, *Jonah*, 157.

⁶¹ Brenner, *Jonah's Poem*, 187.

2. Internal Structure of the Psalm

Trible's rhetorical analysis of the chiasm within the psalm (very much like her earlier analysis of the surrounding narrative) is very comprehensive. Again, without threatening to 'drown the reader', what follows will be a concise and succinct overview of Tribble's work on the stanzas within the psalm.

Tribble's diagram of the psalm is independent of the surrounding prose. In fact, she sees the psalm as being completely removable from the surrounding prose narrative, leaving verses 1-2 and 11 to connect comfortably together. She notes that the "psalm forms a chiasm of four stanzas ... Though of unequal length, the stanzas balance in vocabulary and subject matter."⁶²

A – 2:3
B – 2:4-5
B' – 2:6-8
A' – 2:9-10

In stanza B, Jonah goes metaphorically downward, describing his distress and how the Lord answered him; this is juxtaposed by his metaphorical ascension in stanza B', verses 6 through 8. The outer stanzas, A and A', mirror each other in the beginning of the descent and the end of the ascent. What follows will be a succinct look at the features of each stanza.

a) Stanza A – Beginning with 2:3, Tribble discusses Jonah's "calling" on the Lord. The one who prays in the psalm calls upon his God, as the captain ordered Jonah to do in 1:6. But the psalmist does so long after the captain's imperative. In having waited to call, he

⁶² Tribble, *Jonah*, 506. "The words 'the Lord' and 'voice' occur inversely in stanzas A (v 3) and A' (v 10). The psalm begins with an entreaty to the Lord and the report of an answer; it ends with thanksgiving to Yahweh and the exclamation of deliverance." By inversely, she means that in the first occurrence they are in one order (the Lord, then voice), and in the second occurrence, they are in the opposite (voice, then the Lord).

finds himself in a worse situation than the narrative has reported.⁶³ In other words, the psalm is exaggerating Jonah's situation beyond the prose description. Furthermore, even though the psalmist declares (or feigns, depending on the interpretation) his salvation inside the belly of the great fish, he is still in mortal danger. He has been swallowed (a negative word) by a big fish in whose belly he dwells."⁶⁴

The book of Jonah also begins incorporating new words and phrases at this point. For example, to promote her insertion theory, Phyllis Tribble notes that the Hebrew verb 'to hurl (in Hebrew, *ṭûl*), is used in 1:4-5, 12, 15, but in Jonah 2:3, 4, the psalm uses two other verbs for approximately the same meaning: "cast" (in Hebrew, *shālak*) and "driven out" (in Hebrew, *gārash*).

b) Stanza B – In stanza B (2:4-5), Jonah states that the Lord cast him into the sea and drove him away from his divine sight, when in reality, the sailors did. "The accusation allows Jonah to cast himself in a favorable light."⁶⁵ The line 'to the Temple of your Holiness' suggests a reversal of Jonah's thoughts. It may either be a humble gesture or a defiant one, to quote Tribble: "Given Jonah's desperate situation, the asseverative reading (of the psalm) makes sense. Given his recalcitrant demeanor, the adversative makes sense. Perhaps Jonah engages Yhwh on both levels."⁶⁶

Instead of using the phrase "from the presence of the Lord" (1:3, 10), says "from your sight" (2:4). "And never does he use the adjective 'great,' the word most often occurring in the narrative. Yet this adjective might well have prefaced nouns in the

⁶³ Ibid. He is now inhabiting the digestive system of a great fish, instead of simply relenting.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 505.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 506.

⁶⁶ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 167.

psalm, like ‘distress,’ ‘deep,’ ‘flood,’ and ‘mountains’.”⁶⁷ And 2:5 mentions his banishment from God’s Holy Temple. Jonah continues to look to it, as if he had not fled from Him in the first place. This alludes to God being near to him as He would be in the Temple; Jonah is calling to mind the customs as exercised by his faith through the law.

c) Stanza B’ – In stanza B’ (2:6-8), Jonah’s focus is still on himself. “(F)irst person singular as subject, object or possessive occurs twenty-six times”⁶⁸ (throughout the psalm). “He describes the deadly waters reaching to his “neck” (*nepesh*). The word *nepesh* has double meaning. Narrowly it designates that part of the body where breath resides; broadly it encompasses the life of Jonah.”⁶⁹ The bars closing in on him forever only dramatizes the danger. Tribble makes a note of the verb *yārad*, or “he went down”. It occurs first when Jonah goes down to Joppa (1:3), and then appears when he goes down to the ship (1:3), and when he goes into the ship to sleep (1:5).⁷⁰ Finally, the last *yārad* comes at 2:7, when Jonah descends to the roots of the mountains. But, “(a)t the nadir of misfortune comes the dramatic reversal.”⁷¹ The verb *‘alâ*, or “go/bring up”, counters *yārad*. The opposing verbs are highlighted by the very way they are listed in the Hebrew text. Jonah emerges from ‘the Pit’ (yet another netherworld analogy), and he juxtaposes talking about his plight to talking about God,

“confirming himself as a model of piety. He remembered the Lord, and his prayer came to the holy Temple. First Jonah looked toward the Temple; this time his prayer has arrived there. Yet all the while he remains in the belly of the fish.”⁷²

⁶⁷ Tribble, *Jonah*, 505.

⁶⁸ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 171.

⁶⁹ Tribble, *Jonah*, 506.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, much as Sasson had mentioned previously (Sasson, *Jonah*, 152).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 507. This would seem to damage Tribble’s case; however, she makes no issue of it. She sees the psalm as adding the descent/ascent theme separately from the composition of the prose, purposefully deepening Jonah’s struggle between life and death.

One curiosity needs to be addressed in this stanza. It would appear that in these most desperate lines, right before the hopeful ascent, there is no typical psalter language as had been seen before. There are sixteen allusions to the psalter within the psalm of Jonah, “nine of which appear in vv 3-6a and seven in vv 7b-10 – but none in the center. Jonah leaves the familiar world of the psalter in vv 6b-7a.”⁷³ Also of note, Jonah’s direct dialogue with God ends at the beginning of this upcoming verse, and begins again at the end of it:

The abyss enveloped about me.
Seaweed clung about my head.
Down I went to the roots of the mountains.
The bars of the netherworld were closing behind me forever.

Christensen makes an interesting and original comparison to Shakespeare’s *Othello*, stating that Shakespeare used almost perfect Greek iambic pentameter until the point at which Othello goes insane, at which point the meter disappears and the highly stylized meter is replaced by an uncomfortable randomness. One need not be familiar with Greek iambic pentameter to be made uncomfortable by this sudden change in tempo.⁷⁴ Much the same occurs in the book of Jonah: God is mentioned consistently up until 2:6b, and then suddenly the focus of the psalm shifts from being focused on God to being focused on Jonah. It becomes a Jonah centered psalm until 2:7a, and then abruptly the psalm focuses back on God. Even in English, the change is pronounced. The psalm changes the imagery and tone the way Shakespeare changed the tempo of his plays to signify change, which is unusual for lament psalms, or any psalm, for that matter.

d) Stanza A’ – Finally, in stanza A’ (2:9-10), another aspect of Jonah’s character appears.

⁷³ Christensen, “The Song of Jonah,” 227-28.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

Asserting his own piety leads Jonah to disparage others. He begins the last stanza by inserting a reference that has nothing to do with himself and Yahweh. Without provocation he takes on “those who cling to worthless idols,” convicting them of forsaking the loyalty (*khesed*) of Yahweh ... Jonah affirms the faithfulness (*khesed*) of Yahweh and of himself while denigrating the faithlessness of others.⁷⁵

Who are those who forsake the loyalty of the Lord? Certainly not the sailors. They sacrificed and paid vows, just like Jonah will do as soon as he leaves the belly of the fish, or so he claims. Certainly not the Ninevites, who will forsake their idols immediately upon hearing the prophecy of Jonah. This, Tribble will claim, exacerbates the tension seen in the book of Jonah. The “psalm slows down the movement of the plot, heightens the irony, and complicates the character portrayal of Jonah.”⁷⁶ She sees Jonah’s piety as counterfeit in light of the prose, particularly in reference to both the pagan sailors and the Ninevites.

While Tribble is adamant in her assertion that the insertion of the psalm in Jonah 2 is too strange to ignore, her idea of chiasmic symmetry offers a different angle from which to explore the psalm, which other scholars will subsequently take up. In summary, Tribble concentrates solely on the psalm and its immediate surroundings, whereas Christensen and Landes attempt to further the relationship of the psalm to the rest of the book. Tribble believes the chiasm surrounding the psalm shows that the prose narrative and psalm are independent of each other. Then, Tribble analyses the psalm itself to show that the psalm’s own internal chiasm is independent of the surrounding chiasm in the prose.

⁷⁵ Tribble, *Jonah*, 507.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

B. Duane L. Christensen

1. The Chiastic Structure of Jonah 2

As previously noted, Phyllis Tribble and Duane L. Christensen disagree on whether or not the psalm was inserted into the text of Jonah. This thesis has already analyzed the chiasm surrounding the psalm, as well as the chiasm within the psalm, which Tribble sees as being incompatible with one another.

Christensen proposes the possibility that the original writer of Jonah drafted a story to expand upon the Jonah psalm, but asks the question why this writer did not bring the prose into greater harmony with the psalm.⁷⁷ But Christensen argues there is harmony exists between the psalm and chapter 2 of Jonah.

His chiastic structure links the psalm with its prose surroundings in chapter 2. Christensen hinges the theme of this chiastic structure on the ‘descent and ascent’ themes in vv 6-7c. Furthermore, he sees Jonah’s descent into the depths of the vessel in chapter 1, verse 5, as foreshadowing his descent into the fish and down into the ‘roots of the mountains’. Christensen’s schema is as follows:⁷⁸

2:1-2	A YHWH appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah	PROSE
2:3	B Jonah’s prayer from Sheol: a lament	PSALM
2:4-5	C Though driven from YHWH’s presence, Jonah continues to look to his holy Temple	
2:6-7b	D Jonah’s descent “to the roots of the mountains”	
2:7c	D’ Jonah’s ascent “from the Pit”	
2:8	C’ Though his “soul-life has expired,” Jonah continues to turn to YHWH in his holy Temple	
2:9-10	B’ Jonah’s prayer in YHWH’s “Temple”: a thanksgiving	
2:11	A’ At YHWH’s word the fish vomits Jonah	PROSE

⁷⁷ Christensen, “The Song of Jonah,” 217.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 226

In the prose introduction, Jonah's cry emerges from the belly of the fish, but his cry in the psalm is from the womb of the netherworld, or Sheol. The only thing that can be certain is that Jonah has sunk a level lower than he previously had been; first "down to Jaffa," then into the bowels of the ship, then into the churning waters, and now inside the great fish. The last step of his descent is in his prayer – his conscience.⁷⁹

Christensen believes that these features suggest that the prose framework around the Jonah psalm is in fact an integral part of the structure of the longer Song of Jonah (2:1-11). To further examine this, we must move beyond chiasms and examine its meter.

2. Metrical Analysis of Jonah 2

Christensen argues that, while there is a metrical boundary separating the psalm from the rest of the prose in chapter 2, it is no different from any other boundary found within the book of Jonah.⁸⁰ He uses another rhetorical-critical method to dissect the psalm: metrical analysis. His wish is to show that the internal structure of the psalm matches that of the prose. He admits the lack of consensus on what actually constitutes Hebrew meter, but he confidently states that "his work is concerned primarily with the Song of Jonah (chap. 2), where I will attempt to demonstrate that the prose framework of Jonah's psalm is in fact an integral part of the psalm itself, particularly from a metrical point of view."⁸¹

Christensen's thesis revolves around two basic modes of metrical analysis – the first, he refers to as the 'syntactic-accentual method,' which is a slight modification of the

⁷⁹ Sasson, *Jonah*, 152. The 'down, down, down' motif is repeated by many a scholar. This is not incidental, as it is not a well-hidden design in the psalm.

⁸⁰ Christensen, "The Song of Jonah," 219-20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 218-19.

‘Ley-Sievers method,’ or the traditional approach to Hebrew meter.⁸² This is where the poetic line is determined by the stress which naturally occurs on syntactic units. The second approach is a ‘syllable counting method,’ which counts the length of the poetic lines in terms of the number of syllables.⁸³

What Christensen proposes is a refinement and combination of the two methods. He creates what he calls a ‘morae counting method’, that is, one based on “the length of time required to say the simplest syllable from a phonetic point of view.”⁸⁴ He insists on keeping the approach as simple as possible, and not ‘overrefining the system.’ He summarizes his evidence as such:

(T)he song of Jonah falls into two equal halves: vv 1-5 (213 morae) and vv 6-11 (210 morae). And within these two major sections there is still further symmetry in length as shown in the following table:

vv 1-3 (I)	127 morae (prose)	vv 6-8 (III)	123 morae (psalm)
vv 4-5 (II)	86 morae (psalm)	vv 9-11 (IV)	87 morae (prose + psalm)
Total	213 morae	Total	210 morae

These morae tie into Christensen’s chiasmic analysis. If one were to cut the second chapter of Jonah in half, you would get roughly equal parts from a syntactic-accentual point of view. Vv 1-3 and 6-8 match up very well, and vv 4-5 and 9-11 are virtually identical. But what is even more interesting to note is that this analysis includes the so-called prose framework with Jonah’s psalm (2:3-10).⁸⁵

⁸² Ibid., 220. The Ley-Sievers method “focuses on patterns of word stress within given poetic lines.” He specifically borrows from J. Kurylowicz’s *Studies in Semitic Grammar and Metrics* (London, Curzon, 1973) 176, which “counts syntactic units rather than individual words. Thus, some independent nouns and verbs lose their accent altogether when considered from a metrical point of view,” as argued by Christensen.

⁸³ Ibid., 220-21. Since it “is essentially a means of assessing the actual length of poetic lines rather than the rhythmical manner in which these same lines were spoken (or sung), there is no real reason to see the method of syllable counting as inherently in opposition to that of stress counting.”

⁸⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 224-25. Note that the numbering is that of the NAB style.

Christensen views the entire book as an interwoven symmetry, and if we were to push the case far enough, taking the psalm out of the book would mean that imported symmetry and valuable meaning for the entire book would be lost. The subject of the Jonah psalm's rhetorical features, as we have seen, cannot be studied without its greater prose context, at least in terms of symmetry. Indeed, for Christensen, chapter 4 of Jonah also boasts a rudimentary chiasm, much like the one in Jonah 2, psalm included.⁸⁶

3. Jonah as an Anti-Elijah Figure in the Book of Jonah

To further promote the relationship between the psalm and the prose of the book, Christensen advocates a comparison of Jonah with Moses and Elijah. First, in chapter 2, Christensen sees Jonah as an anti-Moses figure of sorts. Whereas Moses ascended to the top of the mountain to encounter God, Jonah descended to the roots of the mountains for an “unexpected theophany.”⁸⁷ Also of note is the relationship between Exodus 34:6-7 and Jonah 4:2, where both begin with the divine attributes of the Lord: “The Lord, the Lord, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in loving kindness and faithfulness.” In Exodus (34:6), Moses calls down the Lord with this exultation on Mount Sinai; in Jonah, the prophet states these attributes as negative qualities, believing that the Lord should strike down the city regardless of their repentance. His argument also calls to mind the recalcitrant language of the Israelites while awaiting escape from the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:12).⁸⁸

In the ancient Hebrew *weltanschauung*, the world was shaped like a snow-globe on top of pillars, which were also called “the roots of the mountains.” Within these roots resided Sheol, sometimes referred to as “the pit,” or the place of the dead, which is also

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 230.

⁸⁸ Jonathan Magonet, “The Book of Jonah” (ABD 3: New York: Doubleday, 1992) 939.

mentioned within the Jonah psalm. Not only is Sheol a symbol pointing to how low Jonah has fallen, but it also serves to remind the ancient Jew of the piety of Moses and Elijah. Jonah encounters God as he descends to the netherworld while Moses and Elijah climb mountains to encounter Him. This clearly contrasts Jonah's theophany to that of the prophets.

Secondly, Christensen believes that the character of Jonah is something of an anti-Elijah figure. There are so many ironic parallels between the episode of Elijah when he fled for his life from Jezebel (1 Kgs 19) and parts of the story of Jonah that a good case can be made that Jonah's actions are but a parody of Elijah's.⁸⁹ Both Elijah and Jonah sit down under a desert plant after a day's journey to receive a message from God, and both ask that they may die (cf. 1 Kgs 19:4 and Jonah 4:3, 8). Also, both prophets had gone to sleep before the message was delivered (1 Kgs 19:5 and Jonah 1:5).⁹⁰ Whereas Elijah is taken up at a whirlwind by the Lord's command (2 Kgs 2:11), Jonah is thrown into a tempest for angering the Lord (Jonah 1:17).

In each of the stories, the imagery is vivid and strong, both are meant to evoke reactions from the reader. Jonah is very much the opposite of the prophets revered in the Torah and Nevi'im. Moses in particular can be seen as being reluctant when first called, but eventually becomes the willing instrument of the Lord. This is in stark contrast to Jonah: at no point does the prophet realize his error. Even after the Lord explains why He has allowed the Ninevites to repent, Jonah is seen simply to sulk. The Lord has the last word, and Jonah cannot counter it. Indeed, for the purposes of the book of Jonah, Moses

⁸⁹ Christensen, "The Song of Jonah," 230; Marcus, *From Balaam*, 132, fn. 187. He references Miles and Magonet as making such a case, as well as Schildenberfer, Good, Witzernath, Vanoni and the LaCocques as well.

⁹⁰ Christensen, "The Song of Jonah," 230-31; Miles, "Laughing," 180; Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 102. This specifically ties Jonah to Elijah's theophany on Mt. Horeb.

and Elijah can be seen as his foil. At its most benign, Jonah becomes a cautionary tale; at its most severe, it is an equation (and therefore, condemnation) of the Israelite people with Jonah at the time of the book's composition.

C. George M. Landes

Landes, like Christensen, analyzes the book beyond the immediate surroundings of the psalm. He believes there is symmetry between chapters 2 and 4 of the book. He believes that the author of Jonah constructed his narrative in two roughly parallel parts which places chapter 2 and chapter 4 in a juxtaposition. Landes considers the focus of chapters 1 and 3 to be on pagans, the former being the sailors and the latter being the Ninevites. Chapters 2 and 4 focus squarely on Jonah. Jonah prays (2:1; 4:2), and he refers back to his distressing situations and calls upon God's mercy (2:7-9 and 4:2). Jonah speaks to God in 2:10 and 4:3 (although they are very much antithetic reactions: Jonah praises the Lord in the former and asks to die in the latter), and the Lord responds wordlessly in Jonah 2:11, and verbally in 4:4-11, saying that His actions were done in part so that Jonah could respond favorably to his divine mission, which the reluctant prophet had already accomplished on behalf of the Lord.⁹¹

While these separate chapters differ in form (poetry vs. prose), type (declaration vs. complaint) and content (praise and thanksgiving), they both illustrate a common form of intercessory prayer in the Hebrew Bible.⁹² His proof of this is found in the last verse of chapter 2, where Jonah's psalm of thanksgiving is responded to by his release from the

⁹¹ Landes, "The Kerygma," 16-17. This is also another instance of the necessity of re-numbering the verses of Jonah 2 for the sake of consistency. Also of note, on page 18 of Landes, is that "[i]n any event, the fact that the psalm's presence upsets the balance in length between itself and 4:2-3 is no important argument for its original absence from the book (without the psalm, a similar imbalance in the opposite direction emerges!)."

⁹² Ibid.

great fish. Overall, Landes sees a rudimentarily symmetrical book, and he also makes a case for symmetry between chapters 1 and 2:

CHAPTER 1 Focus on the Sailors	CHAPTER 2 Focus on Jonah
1. Crisis situation: threatened destruction by a storm (1:4)	1. Crisis situation: threatened drowning at sea (2:3)
2. The sailor's response to the crisis: prayer to Yahweh (1:14)	2. Jonah's response to the crisis: prayer to Yahweh (2:2)
3. Yahweh's reaction to the sailors' prayer: deliverance from the storm (1:15b)	3. Yahweh's reaction to Jonah's prayer: deliverance from death at sea (2:6b; 1:17)
4. The sailors' concluding response to Yahweh's salvation: worship of Yahweh through cultic acts of sacrifice and vows (1:16)	4. Jonah's concluding response to Yahweh's salvation: worship of Yahweh through praise, culminating in the resolve to perform cultic acts of sacrifice and vows (2:9) ⁹³

Landes notes that, when beseeching the God of the Hebrews, there is no difference between the pagans on the ship and Jonah himself.⁹⁴ This means that God can be supplicated by Hebrews and non-Hebrews alike. He notes even more symmetry in the book, ending the last of his three diagrams with one outlining chapters 3 and 4. Landes sees parallels between the first two chapters and the last two chapters; he sees conformity in the first two chapters, juxtaposed by a lack of conformity between the last two. In the first two chapters, Jonah's relationship with God is considered equal with that of the pagans, whereas in the last two, the Ninevites are seen as superior in piety and repentance.⁹⁵

⁹³ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁴ See Isaiah 56:1-59:24 for a similar stance on the salvation of non-Hebrews.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 26-27. When Jonah called Nineveh to repentance, he likely would have presumed that their actual conversion was a possibility, even if it was remote.

Jonah refused to repent of his desire to see Nineveh destroyed, in contrast to the Ninevites immediate repentance in the face of their destruction. In Jonah 4:4, God asks if Jonah has a reason to be angry. Jonah's actions in 4:5 seems to imply that he still believes God will destroy Nineveh, not that God is attempting to show the prophet his error and change his ways. Jonah actually runs out and builds a shelter at a safe distance from which to view the destruction. To further instruct his prophet about his erroneous beliefs, God appointed a *qiqayon*-plant to rise up out of the ground to shelter Jonah from the harsh Middle Eastern sun. Not even the Lord's gracious provision of the *qiqayon*-plant moves him to modify his thinking. The only joy he actually experiences in this chapter is over the *qiqayon*-plant itself!⁹⁶ According to Landes, the author of Jonah intends 4:8 to serve as the parallel to 2:1; the worm, wind and sun are to act as a catalyst for repentance as the great fish did.⁹⁷ Jonah eventually asks his own *nephesh*, or life-force to die after it became apparent that God's mercy, not His justice, would prevail.⁹⁸ Landes presumes Jonah's despair is directed by his realization that God's mercy extends to those outside the Covenant, and he does not wish to be a part of pagan repentance and salvation.

Why is all of this important? Landes believes that without the psalm situated in the second chapter, the entire symmetry of the book of Jonah is compromised; without the psalm, chapter 2 would be unable to mirror the other chapters of the book. He does acknowledge the possibility that the psalm's insertion was intended to create a symmetry

⁹⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 27-28. A point of interest Landes mentions is that Jonah does not ask God for his own death, but rather asks his own *nephesh* to self-terminate.

that did not previously exist, but that would require very careful reconstruction, and such work would suggest the original author's own hand.⁹⁹

In conclusion, the merits of rhetorical analysis appear to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, analyzing the psalm's rhetorical structure, symmetry and meter give rather concrete evidence that the author/compiler of the book of Jonah knew what he was doing, and had an intended structure for the work. On the other hand, given the abundance of differing opinions on how exactly rhetorical analysis upholds either unity or interpretation, the examination is left as cloudy as when it was first introduced. Each scholar mentioned has made convincing, but oftentimes conflicting, arguments regarding the Jonah psalm.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 30. Landes states that the psalm is "in the proper position, of an appropriate type, and agrees quite harmoniously with the situation of Jonah in the narrative, both in terms of his physical and psychological portrayal."

Chapter Four: Purpose

Towards the end of Chapter Three, we began to explore the issue of the purpose the psalm serves in the prose text, as well as the larger purpose of the character of Jonah himself. Now we will examine the psalm's purpose more fully in its relationship to other Biblical texts and how these relationships may shed light on the role of the psalm within the book. This should further clarify the issue of whether the psalm was original to the text or inserted later. The overall scholarly consensus of Jonah's purpose leans in a certain direction, but is not absolutely certain.

We know that the Jonah psalm is as a thanksgiving psalm, as it follows the typical archetype, flowing from Introduction (v 2), to Lament (vv 3-6a), to Appeal (v 7) to Proclamation (v 6b), to Testimonial (v 8) and finally to Thanksgiving & Vow (v 9).¹⁰⁰ These psalms express a profound gratitude for God's abundant blessings by an individual. In every thanksgiving psalm, there is the story of the deliverance, but in Jonah's case, it actually precedes Jonah's undersea escape. Therefore, the question remains: what is it doing being sung in the digestive system of a large fish as Jonah is apparently being dragged down to the underworld?¹⁰¹

We can assume that the author(s) had a keen knowledge of the psalter and the Scriptures. While we note the peculiarity of the psalm's placement within the narrative prose, we can safely assume that the psalm was not placed there on accident by an unruly scribe. We know this because the context of the psalm fits metaphorically with the prose (note the water and drowning imagery). In between the swallowing (2:1-2) and the

¹⁰⁰ Ernst Wendland, "Song from the seabed – How sweet does it sound? Aspects of the style, structure, and transmission of Jonah's 'psalm'," *Journal for Semitics* 11/2 (2002) 211-17, and André and Pierre LaCocque, *Jonah*, 98.

¹⁰¹ Tribble, *Studies*, 77. Tribble suggests that, because of the water imagery, the psalm may have been originally composed as a thanksgiving for deliverance from a shipwreck or from drowning.

ejecting (2:11) of the prose, there is the Jonah psalm. The question is: Why is it this psalm at this time? The following scholars attempt to ascertain an answer.

A. Athalya Brenner

As we have discussed previously,¹⁰² there are many allusions to psalter imagery in the Jonah psalm.¹⁰³ Athalya Brenner has created a list of the verses in which Jonah matches up line by line to various verses in the Psalms. This list, by her own admission, is by no means exhaustive:

<p>Jonah 2:3a “Out of my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.”</p>	<p>Psalm 130:1: “Out of the depths, I call to you, Lord.”</p> <p>Psalm 118:5: “In danger I called to the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free.”</p>
<p>Jonah 2:4b: “For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea, and the flood enveloped me; All your breakers and your billows passed over me.”</p>	<p>Psalm 42:8b: “Here deep calls to deep in the roar of your torrents. All your waves and breakers sweep over me.”</p> <p>Psalm 88:8: “Your wrath lies heavy upon me; all your waves crash over me.”</p>
<p>Jonah 2:5: “Then I said, “I am banished from your sight! Yet would I again look upon your holy temple.”</p>	<p>Psalm 31:23: “Once I said in my anguish, ‘I am shut out from your sight’. Yet you heard my plea, when I cried out to you.”</p>
<p>Jonah 2:6a: “The waters swirled about me,</p>	<p>Psalm 69:2: “Save me, God,</p>

¹⁰² This thesis, 23-24.

¹⁰³ Although scholars have noted that there are also multiple allusions in the Jonah psalm to non-psalter writings in the Hebrew Bible, we will briefly look into only those psalms which seem to share themes with it.

threatening my life.”	for the waters have reached my neck.”
Jonah 2:7a: “Down I went to the roots of the mountains; the bars of the netherworld were closing behind me forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord, my God.”	Psalm 30:10: “What gain is there from my lifeblood, from my going down to the grave? Does dust give you thanks or declare your faithfulness?”
Jonah 2:8a: “When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord”	Psalm 42:7: “My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you.” Psalm 77:4: “When I think of God, I groan; as I ponder, my spirit grows faint.”
Jonah 2:9: “Those who worship vain idols forsake their source of mercy.”	Psalm 31:7: “You hate those who serve worthless idols, but I trust in the Lord.”
Jonah 2:10: “But I, with resounding praise, will sacrifice to you; What I have vowed I will pay: deliverance is from the Lord.”	Psalm 116:17-18: “I will offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.” ¹⁰⁴

The reason for the use of such an impressive amount of psalter imagery may be to make the psalm seem familiar to the reader. In the end, the Jonah psalm may have been meant as a pun on the psalter, prayed by the reluctant prophet Jonah.

Why is the psalter imagery so important? The simplest, most logical explanation would be familiarity. The easiest way to get a reader to relate to your story is to show them something familiar, and to an Israelite living in the post-exilic Levant, there may

¹⁰⁴ Brenner, “Jonah’s Poem,” 185. Sasson, *Jonah*, 168-201, has a list that’s far more exhaustive; he examines each potential alliteration.

have been nothing more familiar than the psalter. As stated before, this particular psalm falls into a fairly common category of a thanksgiving psalm. Is Jonah simply reciting this thanksgiving psalm as a good Israelite would in such a dire, if outrageous, situation? Or is he simply mouthing the words without thinking, because that's what an Israelite is supposed to do?

Brenner considers the psalm to be just a break in the plot, a filler.¹⁰⁵ To promote her theory, she compares the Jonah psalm with the Davidic psalm embedded in 2 Sam. 22. “Placed within the context of addenda (2 Sam. 21-24) that are only loosely connected to the narrational context (2 Sam. 20 on the one side and 1 Kgs 1-2 on the other side), David’s psalm has no overt biographical significance – just like Jonah’s ‘psalm’.”¹⁰⁶ She also uses Hannah’s prayer (1 Sam 2:1-10) as an example of the type of intrusion she believes the Jonah psalm likely is. To Brenner, the link between prose and poem is problematic because it introduces a ‘suspension of tension’ in the basic plot. Whereas the contents of the poem and the prose do not correlate closely, the psalm does develop the prose water imagery. The correspondence between both is ‘overt but superfluous,’ based more on linguistic correlation than on real congruity.¹⁰⁷ The psalm, to her, is a “multifunctional literary device. It enhances the tension while allowing a respite. It

¹⁰⁵ Brenner, “Jonah’s Poem,” 185. An important note here is that Sasson seems to agree with Brenner that the psalm is a filler. Even though he does not use the same terminology, he does reference similar oddities when referring to the Jonah psalm and other psalms like it in the Bible. He, like Brenner, notes the use of poetry uttered by a main character that seems to have no use in the plot of the narrative. His list of potentially related ‘strangely-placed psalms’ (or, as he refers to them, poetry that has no reference to the immediately surrounding narrative) is more extensive. He notes this plot device occurs in “the Testament of Jacob (Genesis 49), in the Song and Testament of Moses (Deuteronomy 32-33), in the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10), in the penitential Psalm of Hezekiah (Isa 38:10-20; but absent from 2 Kings 20) and in much of Balaam’s panegyrics (Numbers 23-24)”; Sasson, *Jonah*, 201. Day (“Problems”, 41) adds the Apocryphal Prayer of Azariah into this list, inserted between Dan 3:23-24. He asserts that this prayer, as well as the Prayer of Hezekiah, is absolutely known to be scribal additions. He uses this logic to assume the same of Jonah, calling the assumed redactor “clumsy” on the aforementioned page.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 185-86.

introduces a variety of poetic expression,”¹⁰⁸ while the water and abyss imagery typically refer to situations of dread or overwhelming odds. Read within the context of the framing prose, these metaphorical references to drowning are no longer simply that; they refer to the ‘real thing’.¹⁰⁹

B. James Watts

Watts suggests that, in light of the complexities found in placing a work like Jonah into a particular literary genre, placing the book of Jonah into a special niche of a ‘poetry-prose’ work, although he believes most modern interpreters miss the genre’s attempt at subversion.

The appearance of psalms and other poems in standard structural and thematic roles in Hebrew narrative indicates that their use was informed by literary conventions. This observation is confirmed by the fact that ... such conventions seems to be subverted in one way or another to sharpen the impact of the narrative’s message.¹¹⁰

Watts also believes that “(t)he creation and subversion of conventions by the use of psalms in narrative contexts illustrates the importance of the history of complex literary genres for the interpretation of biblical and other ancient texts.”¹¹¹ He is nevertheless quick to point out that Hebrew genre is difficult to quantify, since there is a distinct lack of ancient Hebrew literature outside the Bible to serve as a basis for comparison.¹¹²

Considering the possibility of the psalm being interjected for literary and stylistic purposes, Watts notes that interjected poetry is not unusual in Ancient Near Eastern literature, particularly Sumerian and Akkadian myths. The similarities to the Jonah psalm

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 186.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 189.

¹¹⁰ Watts, “Song,” 146.

¹¹¹ Watts, “Song,” 146-47.

¹¹² Watts, “Song,” 147.

are most notable, for example, in the Ninurta myth *Lugal-E* (translated: ‘O Warrior King!’), as it opens with a psalm of praise to the god Ninurta, just like the Jonah psalm does to God.¹¹³ A number of other epics, such as “*Anzu, Erra*, and the old Babylonian version of *Gilgamesh* all begin with hymnic prologues.”¹¹⁴ His case is further built by his analysis of ancient Egyptian literature, where he finds a significant amount of poetry laced in the middle of prose narratives. Examples include the celebratory speech of Isis in the tale of *Horus and Seth*, the Ramses II’s memorial inscription of a battle at Kadesh (which hold Jonah-like insertions), and the Merneptah Stela and Piye Stela of the 8th Century BC.¹¹⁵ Additionally, the myth of a three-day underwater adventure is not restricted to Jonah alone. In the familiar Greek myth of Hercules, Hesione, the daughter of the Trojan king, is rescued by Hercules from the belly of a sea monster that had been holding her in its stomach for three days.¹¹⁶ Whether the Herculean story influenced the book of Jonah or not is unclear.

While this does not answer the ‘why’ of the Jonah psalm, it suggests that such a stylistic device was not unusual. To insert a psalm into the middle of a prose narrative may seem almost fatuous to the modern reader, but in the ancient Mesopotamian world, it was not uncommon to pay tribute to an adventure or person in the middle of an epic.

¹¹³ Watts, “Song,” 136. Watts here uses Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once ... Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 235, for his analysis of *Lugal-E*.

¹¹⁴ Watts, “Song,” 136. Watts does note that “Hymnic material in the midst of narrative is less common in cuneiform literature than are initial and final hymns, though notice should be taken of Marduk’s lament over Babylon in the *Erra* epic, and Gilgamesh’s lament over Enkidu in *Gilgamesh*.”

¹¹⁵ These, and all other references in this paragraph are either paraphrased or borrowed from Watts’ “Song and the Ancient Reader” article.

¹¹⁶ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Hercules; Trojan women; Phoenician women; Medea; Phaedra* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press) 2002.

C. Alastair Hunter

Hunter, like Watts, believes that “the ancients saw fit to present (the Jonah psalm) as a single composition”¹¹⁷ for a reason. Hunter sees the Jonah psalm as having Exodus motifs, much like Christensen had surmised in the previous chapter¹¹⁸, believing that both the poem and the prose narrative reveal an author whose “knowledge of a familiar body of Hebrew scripture is extensive and impressive, and who employs that knowledge in a highly imaginative way.”¹¹⁹ He also believes that the dramatic psalm in the middle of the prose is the instigator of the wider prose drama.¹²⁰ Perhaps the author of the book of Jonah had a great affinity for an already written psalm, and he wanted to write a prose text to frame and honor it. This would mean that the psalm and prose are inseparable, perhaps having even been composed for one another. Yet still, the modern reader is uncomfortable, seeing the psalm as an oddity in the larger text. Could it be that the modern reader may be blind to Jonah’s original intent? Hunter proposes that the book of Jonah is no more preposterous or wild than many of the stories and myths of the Old Testament:

Could it be that the incongruity is entirely in the eye of the modern beholder? And if so, might the whole tale be less grotesque from an ancient perspective? The venerable exodus myth itself is, in this respect no less, and no more, incongruous than Jonah, and is indeed equally replete with bizarre natural effects controlled by God.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Hunter, “Jonah,” 143.

¹¹⁸ See pages 29-31 of this thesis.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154. He interestingly notes an ‘author’ of Jonah, not ‘authors’.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 156. Hunter believes that the psalm, possibly understood as awkward only by our modern standards, was influenced by what he terms “epic motifs – specifically the river ordeal and the exodus through the sea.” In fact, other commentators have regularly identified parallels elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible for the themes in the narrative chapters of Jonah (not just the psalter, as stated earlier). “Though it is important to emphasize that none is a simple imitation,” Hunter, “Jonah,” 154.

While it assuages the modern reader's discomfort, it does not answer the empirical question of 'why'. Why does this book persist in being so troublesome when examined? It may be due to the fact that the modern reader lacks a certain sense of humor that the ancients had.

D. Jonah as Satire

The genre most scholars espouse for the book of Jonah as a whole is that of satire. Hunter, makes this his first choice, and believes that the humor in Jonah "conform(s) closely to the contemporary modern (western) *Zeitgeist*."¹²² Phyllis Tribble, who is most strongly a proponent of a redactor editing the psalm into the prose, believes Jonah most easily fits into the realm of satire.

The genre of satire uses irony, derision, wit, invective, and related phenomena to attack a specific target. Though the attack has a serious purpose, humor mediates it. In the process the grotesque, the absurd, and the fanciful may come into play. A preponderance of these features within a story confirms it as satire.¹²³

Jonah's predicament inside the great fish can very easily be seen as comical, given its absurdity. For Tribble, Jonah is an unlikeable man who wishes to change God's plans (that is, he wished the Lord to show His divine justice, not His mercy).¹²⁴ Tribble mentions the "triumphant self-affirmation" that Jonah displays, and she believes that the psalm involves a link between suffering and egotism. While his psalm is a thanksgiving to God, not once is he self-effacing; rather, he is boastful. This is what Tribble views as a satirical revision of thanksgiving, as thanksgiving and triumphalism become confused in the

¹²² Ibid., 156.

¹²³ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 470.

¹²⁴ See Jonah, 4:2-3: "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

psalm. “Jonah is exuberant in thanksgiving, proclaiming life in the midst of death and expressing gratitude for divine deliverance. Yet he is also boastful as he exults in piety over against those whom he condemns.”¹²⁵ Jonah’s ‘triumphalism’ furthers the satire: while the expected reaction to salvation is thanksgiving, Jonah’s haughtiness is in direct opposition to that salvation. Indeed, everyone *except* for Jonah fears the Lord and prays to Him in the rest of the book. The Lord has chosen him to be His representative. Yet out of the entire book, Jonah is the least loyal to Him out of all the characters, including the pagan sailors, the Ninevites, and even the great fish. The comparison is truly staggering when considered in the light of other righteous characters in the Old Testament: Moses, Elijah, and even the righteous pagans such as Melchizedek and Rahab.

E. Jonah as Parody

Miles, who theorizes that the book of Jonah is one big Hebrew parody, sees a subtle nuance between satire and parody.¹²⁶ Satire is that brand of humor that uses vices and shortcomings to shame the target audience into improvement. Parody is a type of satire that uses previously existing texts as its comedic ammunition. Parody, in Jonah, is a distortion of Prophetic literature for comical effect. He also warns us of undertaking the task of satirical analysis:

It is difficult to gauge the satirical sense of another culture because common sense – the standard against which the exaggerations of satire must be measured – has its roots in those humble habits which perish most completely when a culture passes. The comic relief provided by the soldiers in Shakespeare’s histories relieves the modern playgoer but little since he has little notion of what the Elizabethan soldier was like when he was not trying to be funny.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 508.

¹²⁶ Miles, “Laughing,” 168. “Satire is the exposure by comedy of behavior which is standardized and, to that extent, foolish. Parody is that breed of satire in which the standardized behavior to be exposed is literary.”

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

In examining the ever-changing definition of comedy, Miles makes the point that parody depends on the society's sense of humor. Is it possible that what a reader in a modern, first-world, secularized environment sees as satire is really an attempt at true pious writing? Likely not. Consider that almost all of the laughter reported in the Bible is a "laughter of scorn, and consequently – as in classical Greek humor – there is relatively wide tolerance for jokes about excretion, belching, vomiting and other indelicacies."¹²⁸

That is what is really funny in Biblical times. The vomiting scene in Jonah 2:11 may be simply slapstick, showing what God thought of his prophet's prayer.¹²⁹ While David Marcus sees this sort of humor as being in the eye of the beholder, he does see numerous satirical details within the book.¹³⁰ Even Jonah's name is ironic: Jonah son of Amittai means "dove son of faithfulness."¹³¹ But he proves to be unfaithful at the first opportunity. By naming the prophet Jonah, "the author fully establishes the expectation in the mind of the reader that God has gotten the right man for the job."¹³² In choosing that particular historic figure, the author creates another connection for the reader: the Jonah of 2 Kings 14:25 was a 'nationalistic prophet' who predicted the expansion of the kingdom of Jeroboam II between 786-746BC, "and if our prophet was modeled after him, then, had he been true to type, he would have leaped at the opportunity to call down doom upon Nineveh."¹³³

¹²⁸ Miles, "Laughing," 175.

¹²⁹ Marcus, *From Balaam*, 119-20.

¹³⁰ The prophet who runs from God; Jonah's being swallowed by a great fish and then vomited up when the prayer is recited; forcing the animals to wear sackcloth; becoming angry with God when He spares those He said He would, are just some examples of the satirical details Marcus sees within Jonah.

¹³¹ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 470.

¹³² Marcus, *From Balaam*, 107. One of the characteristics of a dove is to soar aloft; Jonah, ironically, goes in a downward direction.

¹³³ Marcus, *From Balaam*, 96.

Even the call of Jonah (Jonah 1:1) is meant to be satirical. For example, it is a typical reaction in Hebrew narrative for those who receive the prophetic call to, at first, reject it (e.g. Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah). But the definition of a prophet is one who accepts his prophetic call. “A Hebrew prophet who refused to prophesy, regardless of the message, would be regarded in ancient Israel as an oxymoron.”¹³⁴ By presenting a prophet who actually buys out of his vocation, as Jonah did with the pagan sailors, the author shows the extent to which he is willing to stretch the parody. “Moses could hardly have been more mundane than Jonah had he thrown water on the burning bush or pawned the miraculous staff to escape confrontation with Pharaoh.”¹³⁵

There is no allegory here in this satirical psalm. Whereas being swallowed by a great monster, having waves crash over your head, and being vomited out all seem to be symbolic, the author of the book intends Jonah’s plight to be his true situation. Miles, like Brenner, submits that the Jonah psalm is placed therein for comic effect; comical exaggeration is the *modus operandi* of the book’s author, using the classical reluctance of the prophets and pious gentile characters to not only foolish, but funny extremes.¹³⁶

One cannot help but be amused by the irony of Jonah’s situation in the psalm: having been gulped down by a great fish, he subsequently prays to the God he was fleeing while still stuck in its innards.¹³⁷ There is also a great deal of irony to be found in

¹³⁴ Marcus, *From Balaam*, 143.

¹³⁵ Miles, “Laughing,” 172.

¹³⁶ Miles, “Laughing,” 174-175. “(W)e may note that water and pit imagery is found in four out of its seven verses. The most concentrated water and pit imagery in the psalter (Pss. 69 and 84) is not nearly as concentrated as that ... We may say then, to hazard a pun, that this short psalm unleashes a veritable flood of water imagery. The references in vs. 7 to the base of the mountains and the bars of Earth are no less watery than the others, for the foundation of the cosmic mountain is the cosmic river which also bars or limits the earth. The detail of vs. 6, ‘seaweed wrapped round my head,’ extravagant in any setting, has in its present setting the special extravagance of slapstick.”

¹³⁷ Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (1st ed.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 89. “The lines that ... connect the big fish to

v 9, where Jonah looks disparagingly upon “those who worship vain idols” and “forsake their source of mercy”, the very ones who showed true piety on board the ship Jonah was using to escape from the Lord. Perhaps Tribble was right; perhaps the prayer offered was so saccharine that the fish could not help but wretch him out onto the shore in a fit of nausea.

Jonah continues to be an object of the author’s ridicule after his ejection, and the complete absurdity of his situation lends itself to parody.¹³⁸ In chapter 3, the King of Nineveh absurdly commands that the animals of Nineveh be forced to wear sackcloth and fast in repentance of their sins. Examples of parody are littered throughout the text of Jonah, both in relation to the psalm, and the rest of the prose. Parody occurs when it distorts its target, whether the target is traditional texts, known individuals, or expected norms of behavior. Distorting the psalter and the prophetic examples of Moses and Elijah, as well as praying a falsely repentant thanksgiving psalm while in the digestive system of a great fish, certainly seem to classify the book of Jonah as a parody.

Additionally, the last chapter of Jonah, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, is particularly humorous. Jonah has a dialogue with God regarding His loving-kindness (*khased*) towards the Ninevites: the fact that God’s plan all along was to bring them into repentance and not to kill them (a fact that God did not hide), infuriates Jonah, enough for Jonah to wish for his own death.¹³⁹ After telling the Ninevite king that he must either repent or die, Jonah waits patiently outside of Nineveh for its destruction at the hand of

tangible points in the ‘real’ world, are, as it were, extreme, cartoonish pointers to the disciplinary teratology that maps the field of biblical studies.”

¹³⁸ Marcus, *From Balaam*, 122. “Parody attacks the target by contrasting it in a distorted manner with traditional texts, known individuals or expected norms of behavior.”

¹³⁹ Jonah might have been counting on God’s anger to “blot them out of (His) book” (Ex 32:33) as He did when Aaron and the Israelites constructed a golden calf while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Decalogue from Him.

the Lord. He even builds himself some shade while he waits, and God provides him with more shade from a *qiqayon* plant. When God kills the plant after Jonah gets comfortable with it, out of anger he again wishes for his own death. But God uses the plant as a didactic tool, explaining to Jonah how he should not be any angrier over the plant he did not work for than he should be over the salvation of the Ninevites. Instead of responding in kind to Jonah's anger, He attempts to teach him. The very last line of the book, Jonah 4:11 is: "And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" The very last line cries out as an oddity. It is as though God were saying, "Not only am I *not* going to kill the Ninevites, but think of all that cattle I'm saving!" If one were unaware of the satirical nature of the line, confusion would be an understandable response. Under the light of parody, however, ending a strange book with a strange verse seems justified.¹⁴⁰

We must remember that, if we are to view the book of Jonah as a satirical comedy, we are meant to laugh at Jonah; he is meant to be the recipient of this parody and an object of ridicule. Without the psalm in the middle of the prose, we would not see the absolute absurdity of the plotline. In fact, it may be possible that, without the psalm, the book may never have been composed. If one were to remove the psalm from the prose of Jonah 2, the chapter would look like this:

But the Lord sent a large fish, that swallowed Jonah; and he remained in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. From the belly of the fish Jonah [prayed] to the Lord, his God. Then the Lord commanded the fish to spew Jonah upon the shore.

That's all there is. Those lines are not funny, they are simple and not even remotely detailed. Combining the irony of the events, the parody of the prophetic figure,

¹⁴⁰ Hunter, "Jonah," 156.

and the particular ridicule he undergoes would make it seem that the book of Jonah can be this and nothing else. The obvious absurdities of the book, as instigated by the psalm, help us to understand the various incongruities which, previous to this hypothesis, left the modern reader bewildered. Parody, we must remind ourselves, “is deliberate fiction,”¹⁴¹ and the figure of Jonah is the perfect example of this. The literary structure of Jonah was likely unintended to be a historical reading, but rather it an artistic appeal meant to heighten the irony of Jonah’s words when contrasted with his actions, and further still, the actions of the pagans of the book, who all appear righteous.¹⁴² At the very least, they are righteous when compared to petulant Jonah.

¹⁴¹ Marcus, *From Balaam*, 144.

¹⁴² Wendland, “Song from the seabed,” 214.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to shed light upon the current trends in the research of the Jonah psalm. We have asked a number of questions, and have surveyed a breadth of answers proposed by current scholarship. The book of Jonah appears to be a simple, straightforward work of only 48 verses, yet it contains many enigmas. The main enigma, for our purposes, is this: “Is the psalm in Jonah 2 written by the same author as the prose of the entire book of Jonah?” While there are only two real answers to this question, there are several theories scholars propose to reach their conclusions.

Arriving at a concrete date of composition for the psalm is far from conclusive, albeit enlightening. The book offers no evidence of a compositional date; there are no lists of kings, and the historical information present in the book is flawed (e.g. the pagan king presiding over Nineveh, not Assyria). While we can be reasonably sure that the protagonist of this book is not the same as the Jonah of 2 Kings 14, he was likely meant to harken back to that figure. There is also the curiosity of the psalter language used in the Jonah psalm. For most of the psalm, there is parallel language that can be found elsewhere in the psalter, suggesting the composer of the psalm looked to an already established canon of psalmic literature. The book of Jonah does not have a conclusive date of origin, and there has never been a copy of it found without the psalm. While the reference to Joppa in Jonah 1:3 may give the book a *terminus a quo* of the 4th century BC, both the psalm and the book defy a truly definitive date.

Examining the rhetorical and linguistic features of the psalm, and the larger whole of the book, illuminated its mirroring internal structures, or chiasms. However, there are dissenting opinions regarding whether or not there is any true chiasm connecting psalm to

prose. Phyllis Tribble notes a perfectly sound chiasm in Jonah 2:3-10 (the psalm), but believes it disrupts a chiasm that surrounds it (Jonah 2:1-2; 11 [the prose]), stating that “(t)he presence of the psalm between B’ and A’ [the two final parts of the chiasm in the prose] poses a major challenge for the rhetorical endeavor.”¹⁴³

Duane L. Christensen, in contrast, diagrams a chiasm throughout all of chapter 2, prose and psalm combined. Both arguments are solid, and one can see the validity of both. Additionally, there seem to be internal parallels between the chapters of the book, as illuminated by George M. Landes. This would appear to indicate that, without the psalm in the middle of chapter 2, the parallelism between the chapters would not exist. Given the opposing viewpoints, it is almost as though the structure of the book were an intellectual Rorschach test, leaving the individual scholar to interpret Jonah 2’s diagram the way he or she wishes to see it.

Further examination of the rhetoric in the book of Jonah illuminates the function that Jonah plays in the book. Jonah appears to play the role of ‘anti-prophet’, juxtaposed to the figures of Moses and Elijah, the most revered prophets of the Old Testament. Prophets in the Old Testament are often reluctant when confronted by God’s command, but they eventually accept their mission. Jonah is reluctant to the point of avoidance, literally running away from God’s command and refusing His attention. He is an oxymoron, a prophet who refuses to prophesy.

If the book of Jonah is meant to be a prophetic text, then the prophet Jonah is truly a strange figure. Why would it be necessary for an author(s) of the book to depict Jonah as an anti-prophet? Perhaps it is because the author wanted his readers to see the irony of what Jonah represented: a judgmental, hypocritical Jew of the Second Temple period

¹⁴³ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 160.

who believed that God's loving kindness excluded those outside the Jewish faith. Jonah represented those who mouthed psalms of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, exalting His mercy, yet expressing no mercy to those outside of their chosen group. They praised God for showing mercy upon them, but condemned Him for showing it to others. It is possible that this book may have been meant to deride the representation of rashly nationalistic Jews, who desire what they deem to be 'God's justice' so strongly that they run from God to get it. The irony of Jonah cannot be ignored.¹⁴⁴

When pious pagan sailors throw Jonah overboard, he is consumed by a great fish and is taken down to the netherworld, presumably to die. Here, within the fish, the prose of the narrative becomes poetry, and he recites a prayer that is mostly in contrast to his character. He goes as far as he can to retreat from the Lord's command, yet in 2:5, he states that "I am banished from your sight! Yet would I again look upon your holy temple," and in 2:8a, "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord." While being brought down to the pit, he praises God for saving his life, and the only part of the prayer that seems in any way akin to his nature is 2:9, saying that "Those who worship idols forsake their source of mercy," which is a very exclusive view of the covenant and completely disregards the piety the pagan sailors showed onboard the storm-tossed ship in Jonah 1. The parody is so apparent that the fish pukes Jonah back to life on the shore, unable to further stomach his hypocrisy. The purpose of the book of Jonah is indicated by its genre: parody.

When the prose begins anew, we find Jonah as stubborn and recalcitrant as ever, going to Nineveh to proclaim its doom, and desperately hoping that the Lord will bring

¹⁴⁴ Nationalistic texts such as Ezra-Nehemiah are prime examples of the type of literature the book of Jonah may be satirizing. Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah are the types of texts it is assumed Jonah is echoing

down His justice on that wretched place. His complete lack of repentance is meant to be laughed at. “Jonah does not leave a sinful condition to adopt a saintly one. There is here no ‘metamorphosis’ from a formerly stiff-necked, stubborn, and hard-hearted sinner, into a broadminded, radiant, and successful ‘P.R. person’.”¹⁴⁵ Without psychologically dissecting Jonah *ad nauseam*, we see the Jonah of the psalm and the Jonah of the prose do not appear to equate to one another. The Jonah of the psalm is exhibiting piety, which in light of the prose appears to be false piety, designed to get him out of a near death experience.

The parody continues through the last two chapters, where further oddities abound. The king of Nineveh is so penitent that he orders not only his subjects, but his animals to wear sackcloth in repentance. Despite this, Jonah rushes outside the city and sets up a booth to watch the destruction of Nineveh, but it never arrives. Jonah is so irate that he confronts God, and angrily proclaims His loving kindness as the reason he did not want to prophesy to the Ninevites in the first place, ending his tirade with a wish for death. This hearkens back to Exodus 32:32, when Moses asks the Lord to blot him out of His book for the evils his people have committed, as well as Numbers 14:1-4, where the Israelites wished they had died in Egypt, rather than continue their trek to the Promised Land.

God does not grant this wish, but rather sets up a *qiqayon* plant to provide him shade, which abates Jonah’s anger. But, the next day, the plant is killed by a worm, and Jonah becomes very warm in the Mesopotamian sun, and again asks to die. Then God tells Jonah that he has no right to be upset about the plant anymore than he has a right to

¹⁴⁵ André Lacocque, and Pierre Lacocque, *Jonah: A Psycho-Religious Approach to the Prophet* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990) 108.

be upset about the Ninevites being spared from God's righteous indignation, ending with a proclamation that the cattle should also be saved.

Given the setting of Jonah's ridiculously indignant stance regarding the *qiqayon* plant, and God's curious remark regarding the cattle, the genre of parody should help put the mind of the modern reader at relative ease. If we briefly examine the reasons why a parody is written, we see that it is meant to lampoon a previously existing norm. We have already considered that the composer of the book of Jonah was lampooning the attitude of the post-exilic Jew, but perhaps the book of Jonah is a written response to an already written document.

If it is assumed that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written before the book of Jonah, it may be that Jonah was written in response to their harsh message against mixed marriages, seen as attacks on those outside of the Covenant.¹⁴⁶ John Day also compares the passages regarding the Lord's abounding kindness toward Israel in Joel 2:13-14¹⁴⁷ with Jonah 3:9;¹⁴⁸ and 4:2,¹⁴⁹ where the two Jonah passages apply this kindness to Nineveh. He also sees the book of Jonah as an inclusive response to the exclusive message of Joel. Whereas Joel 4 is considered proto-apocalyptic, foretelling doom for the despised nations, the book of Jonah speaks of mercy to them, and encourages this compassion as administered by God.¹⁵⁰ Akin to Isaiah 40-55 (specifically

¹⁴⁶ Day, *Problems*, 44-45. However, as Day goes on to say, this may not be likely.

¹⁴⁷ Joel 2:13-14 – "Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing, Offerings and libations for the Lord, your God."

¹⁴⁸ Jonah 3:9 – "Who knows, God may relent and forgive, and withhold his blazing wrath, so that we shall not perish."

¹⁴⁹ Jonah 4:2 – "I beseech you, LORD," he prayed, "is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? This is why I fled at first to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathe to punish."

¹⁵⁰ Day, *Problems*, 46-7.

Is 45:12-14; 51:4-5), the book of Jonah may be pointing to a radical idea, one that would include gentiles in the realm of the righteous.¹⁵¹

This makes the psalm a literary device of utmost importance. If the parody is to work, then the whole joke hinges on the psalm. If the psalm is original to the prose, or even an original piece employed by the author of the prose for his own purpose, then it can be deduced that this story is meant to be a tongue-in-cheek critique of the times in which it was written. It introduces absurdity to an already fantastic story.

Jonah does not believe that God's justice must work in accord with His mercy, nor does he believe that his own lack of mercy is too harsh. The group Jonah represents surely directed their anger towards those who held them in captivity (whether it be the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, or the Macedonian-Greeks), since during even that enormous expanse of time allotted to the possible composition of Jonah, the Jewish people were under the control of some Near Eastern or Mediterranean empire.

The author of Jonah employs all of the humorous tricks a parodist could use in order to fetch a response from his readers: satire, ridicule, and of course, irony, which is found in abundance in the book of Jonah.¹⁵² As mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, without the psalm, the absurdity of the joke is lost. It becomes less of a joke and more of a 'tall-tale,' one which serves no discernable purpose. The psalm sets up the joke for the rest of the book, and the punch-line is that Jonah is the least pious, least righteous, and least introspective of all the characters in the book. Even the great fish obeys God better than Jonah! Being a prophet is the most difficult task a man can have, because a prophet is the closest to God out of all people, and therefore, the most separate from the

¹⁵¹ See also Isaiah 56:1-8.

¹⁵² David Marcus, *From Balaam*, 104.

people. The book of Jonah presumes that its target audience would see themselves in the prophet Jonah, and find themselves in need of repentance and a change in outlook.

Whether the book of Jonah was written in response to another Biblical book, such as Ezra, Nehemiah, or Joel, is conjecture at best. It does seem to espouse an inclusive message, stating that one of Israel's greatest enemies, Nineveh (and by association, Assyria), is capable of salvation from the Lord's anger and divine wrath.

God has the final word in terms of the argument between justice and mercy, however, it does seem that the book of Jonah is left somewhat open-ended. This may also have been in the style of the time – to leave the ending open for the readers to decide and make up their own minds, after having been given the evidence and material at hand.¹⁵³ This thesis has been intended in the same manner, to show the reader the style and humor of the book of Jonah and the psalm's integral place in the joke. Whether the psalm and prose were written by the same author is a question still left unanswered, and until more evidence can be unearthed or extracted, it shall remain that way.

¹⁵³ James L. Crenshaw, "The Book of Job," (*ABD* 4; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 860. Jonah ends much like the book of Job before chapter 42, verse 7. It has been argued that the obvious inconsistencies between the book of Job's prose framework and poetic core suggest the work of multiple authors. The prose/poetry issues in the book of Job are remarkably similar to those in the book of Jonah, and like Jonah, no conclusive evidence exists to sufficiently prove or disprove either theory.

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